

Supplement to the Hawaiian Gazette, March 16th, 1881.

Reply Of the Minister of the Interior to the Memorial on East Indian Immigration.

DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR,
Honolulu, Mar. 9, 1881.
Messrs. Geo. C. Williams, J. Wright, E.
Bond, D. R. Vida, and others.

GENTLEMEN:—In the acknowledgment of the receipt of the memorial you did me the honor to send me, I promised you an early reply; circumstances intervened which caused my time and attention to be so fully engrossed that I have been obliged to delay my response, and I trust you will accept my apology for the delay.

In your memorial you call my attention to the deficiency and cost of the labor supply of the country, and allude to the fact that in other sugar producing countries East Indians were employed, and state that you believe the introduction of these people would be productive of great and permanent benefit to this community.

In considering the subject of the supply of labor for the country, it is the belief of the present government that the matter of labor should be regarded as subsidiary to the larger and more important national question of population; that, so far, it has been the general policy of the government to secure for the planters such advantages that the wages of the laboring classes would be such as to stimulate the native population to industry and enterprise, and further to invite the immigration of men with families, who would add to the permanent population of the country, rather than to seek simply for the cheapest supply of laborers without reference to the higher needs of the country. It was hoped that the exceptional advantages of the reciprocity treaty with the United States, even for eight years, would put the industrial interests of the country upon such a footing that they would be able to maintain themselves even if that treaty was not continued in operation after that term.

I see no reason to anticipate the abrogation of the treaty, or to doubt the ability of the country to compete with other sugar producing countries if it should be terminated.

You call my attention to the advantages enjoyed by colonies which are able to obtain the services of East Indian coolies for a term of years at apparently low rates of wages, and in effect ask why steps are not taken to secure the same benefits for this country. This is no new question, but is one which has received very careful consideration. Perhaps the best answer is, because it has never been shown that either the cause of population or cheap labor would be served by the introduction of the class of East Indian who leaves India as a coolie laborer; on the contrary, those who have considered the subject on behalf of the government have arrived at quite the opposite conclusion, and the experiment at Fiji which was watched with great interest seems to justify those conclusions; although it may be possible that in Malaysia or India there may be found people from whom a class of immigrants could be found who would recruit the population of the country, they would hardly be from the class who emigrate to sugar growing countries as coolies. The investigation of this subject, however, so far as population is concerned, is now in the hands of a Royal Commissioner, and the government await with interest his report.

Regarding the subject of labor by itself, the importance of which I have no desire to underrate, I am of the opinion that the advantages enjoyed by colonies employing East Indian coolies have been overrated; even if the coolies could be induced to come to so distant and to them unknown country as this to labor under five years contracts in the usual form, at a shilling a day, which is the minimum rate at which the Indian government allows them to be recruited, we must add to this the cost of passage to this country, with interest, and of returning them to India at the expiration of their contract; the cost will then be nearer ten dollars per month than the six dollars you mention. The cheapness of labor does not, as you are aware, depend wholly on the rate of wages, but upon the quality and quantity of the work performed. So far as I have been able to gather reliable information, the East India coolie compares very unfavorably with either the Chinese or Polynesian.

In a report of H. B. M.'s Commissioners of Enquiry into the condition and treatment of immigrants in British Guiana, where some millions of dollars and many years have been spent in establishing the East India coolie system—the opinion is decidedly in favor of the superiority of the Chinese over the East Indians as laborers, and regret is expressed that the Chinese immigration should be terminated.

Another writer on British Guiana speaking of the Chinese, states that they are "more sober and reliable than any other laboring class in the colony"; and previous to 1866 Chinese

coolies were introduced into Bombay itself. On this subject of wages an authoritative work published in Demerara, says,

Vide Prize Essays on Agricultural Subjects, printed by order of the Royal Agricultural Society of British Guiana, Page 90: "As to wages, we have already mentioned that a shilling a day is the minimum sum that the Guiana government on behalf of the planter guarantees the immigrant for his work. But the latter cannot be forced to work during all the hours prescribed by law for this fixed sum. The law presumes that by working six hours in the field or seven in the building a man will have fairly earned his shilling, and directs that he shall receive it. But the planter is bound to pay him at least as much as he pays unindentured laborers for the same description of work, and as labor is scarce, the rate of pay is high. A good field laborer can, without over exertion, earn two shillings a day at all descriptions of work, and can command a higher price at those which require a little extra skill or experience. It is no exaggeration to say that an able bodied agricultural laborer can, if he works hard with his shovel for six hours during five days in the week, earn from two-and-a-half to four dollars, (ten to sixteen shillings.)"

On the same subject, in the Report of Her Majesty's Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners for 1876, kindly furnished me by Sir Stephen Wolcott, C. M. G., one of the Commissioners, I find it stated as one of the principles governing Indian emigration that *the wages are to be the same as paid to unindentured laborers on the same estate*; and in the same report they say, referring to the West Indies,

Vide Colonization Circular, issued by Her Majesty's Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners, 1877, Page 247: "Agricultural laborers almost invariably work by the task, the usual pay for which varies according to circumstances from one shilling to three shillings per day. An able-bodied and industrious laborer can earn from two to three shillings (75 cents) per day, and these amounts are actually earned by Creoles of African descent and by the more powerful Chinese and East Indian immigrants."

Of the quality of the laborer, I have never been satisfied that it was equal to what this country has been accustomed to, or would adapt itself readily to our system. The most favorable estimate I have ever received regarding the East Indian coolie was that three of them were equal to two Chinese or Africans, and that it required special tact and patience to bring them even to this standard. In the essays to which I have alluded it is said,

Vide Prize Essays, Page 62: "The disinclination for work is so strong in these men as to induce them to practice alternatives which are simply incredible to Europeans. Many will keep painful sores open for weeks in order to prolong their stay in the Hospital; as soon as they are cured and discharged they will start another by means of a rusty nail or something of that kind. Some will purposely eat food especially prohibited by the doctor, to ensure prolonged enjoyment of the Hospital, although it be accompanied by a loathsome and painful illness. The East Indian mind, or to speak more correctly, the mind of that class of East Indians which furnishes immigrants, has for ages looked upon poverty, disease and dirt as marks of high caste piety, and regards the giving of alms to persons practicing these disagreeable habits as a most meritorious action."

Again:—*Vide Prize Essays*, Page 44: "The Hindoo, who in his own country is the most sober of men, becomes in British Guiana infected with the prevailing love of rum, and may be seen reeling about, yelling in his frenzied excitement, or lying like a log by the roadside in a state of drunken stupor. The debauch of Sunday is followed by its natural reaction, so that on Monday the unhappy votary of drink is most unwilling to exert himself. On the other hand there are some well-conducted immigrants, who make a rule of fasting every Sunday, and owing to this unnatural abstinence from food the devotee is often on Monday as unfit for work as his debauched brother."

Again:—*Vide Prize Essays*, Page 92: "One of the worst enemies to the coolie is the village lawyer; the native of India has a natural love of litigation and a readiness to complain about trifles."

Again:—*Vide Prize Essays*, Page 58: "The Asiatics never seem to be content with leaving a case to its own merits; it always appears to them necessary to embellish it with a quantity of collateral falsehoods," &c.

Again:—*"The East Indian, not trained up in early life to endure the hardships of toil, not accustomed to rely upon his own individual exertions or to work his path through life by his own self-reliance and self-denial, is quite un-*

suited to be cast on his own resources and left to take care of himself in this colony."

These quotations I give because they accord with the information given me by several parties who employed them in the West Indies, and who without exception told me that Cape Verde Islanders and Chinese were greatly superior as laborers; and also because they explain the necessity of a code of laws which must in their operation be very vexatious to planters, in order to secure that protection to the Indian which the Indian Government insists upon as a pre-requisite to consenting to the emigration, and which the Imperial Government charges itself with seeing carried out.

I am aware that it has been sometimes asserted that the oversight of Great Britain is a mere formality, and that these people are upon a footing of British subjects generally, but when in London I found no such opinion prevalent, or any desire to make it appear that the necessary conventions or arrangements were meaningless, or that ordinary treaty rights were sufficient. It was clearly stated that the coolies were considered as wards of the Government, and that special protection was intended to be given them. In this the East Indian and Imperial Governments are probably only fulfilling a duty which experience has shown the necessity of. In dealing with foreign countries the custom is to demand the passage of certain laws, and stipulate that they shall not be altered to the prejudice of the coolie during the term of his service, a regulation which would require class legislation, or curtail the exercise of domestic legislation over the whole range of laws affecting the relations of masters and servants. This would probably be readily acceded to in a case where the greater part of the laboring population were East Indian coolies, but should hardly be seriously considered in a self-governing, independent state, where the larger part of its own citizens were of the laboring class.

On this subject of special protection I may quote the language of Her Majesty's Commissioners:—*Vide Colonization Circular*, 1877: "They are protected by special laws and by special officers appointed to administer those laws."

It should be remembered that the whole coolie system as it is called, grew out of an exceptional state of affairs, and is still, more tolerated than approved by a large class of British statesmen, and may at any time be abruptly terminated.

The fact that special arrangements have to be made with Great Britain before any of these people are allowed to emigrate, is sufficient to show that East Indian coolies are not held to be in the same position as any other British subjects. These special arrangements cover the minutest details concerning wages, food, lodging, hospital accommodation, &c., as long as he remains abroad, and provide for his passage home, and he is not free to make any other kind of contract of emigration as any other British subject is.

It may not be inopportune to recall here the circumstances under which the system of transporting laborers from the British East Indies to the sugar growing colonies of Great Britain, under contracts for long terms, arose, and to refer at the same time to the principles upon which the system is conducted.

It is now forty-seven years ago that Great Britain, under the pressure of advancing popular sentiment, compelled the British Colonial sugar planters to abandon the system of negro slavery, a system under which they insisted it was alone possible to continue the profitable production of sugar, and therefore to continue its production at all; and when the forced apprenticeship system of the negro, which followed the abolition of slavery came to an end, it was found as a matter of fact that large numbers of sugar estates went out of cultivation and had to be abandoned. The British Government, seeing the difficulty and anxious to conciliate and assist the Colonists, organized with the consent and assistance of the East Indian Government, what is known as the East India Coolie system, by which Indian laborers, earning very low wages in their own country, were induced to make contracts at higher wages to serve as laborers for long terms in the British sugar growing colonies. The Colonial Governments became responsible in each case for the selection, transport, care, treatment and return of these people, and stringent rules were insisted upon by the British Government in order that no injustice should be practiced upon the ignorant and passive East Indian when removed from his own country. Notwithstanding these precautions, complaints were from time to time presented to the English people, principally through meetings held at Exeter Hall, London, that the Indians were ill-used, and that the system was only a modified form of slavery; the government was urged to abolish it, and it was stopped in 1838 for some four years; it was recommended under still more stringent regulations for the protection of the East Indian, as it was admitted on all hands that he was hardly

capable of taking care of himself. It is now believed that in no British Colony has the East Indian any just cause of complaint, but it is only because he is held as a ward of the British Government, whilst the laws of the Great Empire of India and more particularly of each Colony are required to be specially modified to suit the system. In these appendages to the British Crown, aboriginal races have no voice; profitable sugar growing is the one grand object, and a plentiful supply of cheap labor is of course the great means to that end, so that they frame their laws as best they can in the attempt to try and meet the philanthropic views of the people of Great Britain and at the same time enable them to control the coolie labor. It has been remarked, perhaps with more of sarcasm than justice, that the form of government of these Colonies is "an autocracy of sugar tempered by Exeter Hall," an imputation however under which any colony or country that relies mainly on raising sugar by East Indian contract coolie labor is apt to rest.

Great Britain has extended this privilege of employing East Indians to certain Colonies of France, Denmark and Holland, on condition of passing and maintaining in force codes of laws approved by the Indian Government.

It is of importance to bear in mind in considering the working of this system, that the importation of a certain limited number of coolies usually supplies the demand, but that as the old contracts run out and the coolie goes back to India, with his accumulations, or finds out another method of living in the Colony, new lots of men from India have to be obtained to keep down the rate of wages to its normal level. The working of the system in the neighboring island of Mauritius, an island of less area than Mani, has resulted in a somewhat overcrowded population on January 1st, 1880, of 357,339 souls, of these 150,857 were males and 92,529 were females, showing an excess of males among the Indians of 58,328. The excess of males in the whole population taken together was at the same date 64,501, showing that the excess of males was mainly caused by the coolie system, and which is remarkable in an island so close to India, and where the communication is so cheap and frequent that the Indian Government does not insist on the coolies being granted a free passage back to India, as they do in all other Colonies to which they are permitted to emigrate. The agents of some of the Colonies admit that it is next to impossible to obtain the prescribed proportion of Indian women, even by "sweeping the streets" of the towns of the most abandoned class of females.

It will be seen therefore that when the people, the government and the planters of this country commit themselves to this system, Great Britain consenting, they do not simply admit a few or even a considerable number of laborers or people to be added to the general supply, but rather they inaugurate a labor system which seems usually to swamp all others, at least if intended to accomplish the object which you propose, that is to secure a steady supply of cheap labor obtainable without reference to the suitability of the people as a permanent population for the country.

With the views held by this government as to the general policy of adopting the British India Coolie system, it may perhaps be unnecessary to refer here in much detail to the difficulties which stand in the way of satisfactorily arranging the matter with the British and Indian Governments. Having however been requested when in England to look into this matter, it may be well to summarize the results of my enquiries at head quarters. In the first place, it is absolutely necessary before introducing a single Indian under contract, either to make a special convention with Great Britain, or to agree to bring them under the terms of some convention already made with another country or colony. In carrying out such an arrangement it would be necessary for this kingdom to modify its laws to suit the system. The Imperial Government insists on certain strict regulations for the protection of the coolie, but at the same time the Colonies find it necessary to make some very stringent laws for their control, which I am convinced would be pronounced here unconstitutional, for the protection of the planters and to enable them to get a fair amount of work from the coolie, who is admitted on all hands to be "indentured to a fault" unless held under some compulsory law to work.

Where the population consists mainly of East Indian coolies, or similar people, there is usually not much difficulty in passing such laws; but situated as we are with an intelligent native, foreign-born and mixed laboring population, who have the selection of the law-makers in their own hands, the difficulties would seem insuperable; nor is the difficulty any less if it is proposed to modify the Constitution so as to permit class legislation, and apply laws to the coolies which would not affect the general population. Even in British Guiana, with a large Indian population, the system of making laws to suit other countries is found to be inconvenient, and it is stated in the essays previously alluded to,

Vide Prize Essays, Page 59: "A great misfortune to the Government of Guiana, as indeed must be expected in any country the laws of which are passed at the dictation of other countries, is that very stringent laws not always well digested are sometimes crude."

The British officials in London reminded me that in trying to obtain East Indian coolies for this country, we should have to encounter the passive opposition of the East Indian Government, which quite agreed with Dr. Hillebrand's Report to the

Hawaiian Board of Immigration in 1867, where he states that "on the part of the European element (in India) a strong feeling is gaining ground in opposition to the emigration of coolies," and he explains it by the many railroad and agricultural enterprises on foot, in which they considered they would require all the good available Indian labor themselves. In fact in the same report he tells us that "in 1863, three thousand Chinese coolies were sent from Hongkong to Bombay to be employed in the construction of railroads." Also that it was the intention of a company recently formed for the purpose of draining extensive marshy tracts in the delta of the Ganges "to introduce some six thousand laborers from China!" This seems to present two important points for consideration, namely, the difficulty we might have in keeping up a supply of East Indian coolies against the wishes and interest of the governing class in India, and the value of those coolies as laborers when we may get them, as compared with Chinese.

My own observations on the subject of the introduction of an East Indian laboring class, were that economically it would not be advantageous to the planting interest, as I think the labor would be dearer in cost than either Chinese or Portuguese labor is likely to be, and more difficult of management; that socially, all the evils attributed to the influx of Chinese would be still further aggravated by the East Indians, and new evils growing out of their caste prejudices and social habits, would necessitate new and perhaps conflicting laws as well as a staff of interpreters and legal officers for their special care and protection. That politically it would be inexpedient, considering the lack of clearly defined advantages, for a small and weak government like this to complicate its relations with Great Powers by the conclusion of special conventions regarding the details of municipal legislation concerning a laboring class alien in character and habits, suspicious and litigious, whose petty complaints might be constantly involving their employers and the country, as they have other countries, in long, irritating, diplomatic disputes.

In conclusion, gentlemen, let me say, that His Majesty's government recognize the great importance of the industrial interests you represent, and the important relations they bear to the well-being of the whole population of the kingdom, native and foreign. They are well aware of the importance of the careful adjustment of the cost of production in the world's markets, but they are in hopes that the question of labor pure and simple will soon solve itself; and I think the period which has elapsed since I had the honor of receiving your memorial has shown that we are not without sources of supply of cheap labor, and that such supply is likely to be of such an extent as to rather cause some anxiety lest the demand be more than filled and a surplus be left in regard to which some grave questions may arise.

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